

Old South Leaflets.

Ode Recited at the Harvard Commemoration, July 21, 1865.

BY JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.

I.

WEAK-WINGED is song,
Nor aims at that clear-ethered height
Whither the brave deed climbs for light :
 We seem to do them wrong,
Bringing our robin's-leaf to deck their hearse
Who in warm life-blood wrote their nobler verse,
Our trivial song to honor those who come
With ears attuned to strenuous trump and drum,
And shaped in squadron-strophes their desire,
Live battle-odes whose lines were steel and fire :
 Yet sometimes feathered words are strong,
A gracious memory to buoy up and save
From Lethe's dreamless ooze, the common grave
 Of the unventurous throng.

II.

Today our Reverend Mother welcomes back
Her wisest Scholars, those who understood
The deeper teaching of her mystic tome,
And offered their fresh lives to make it good :
 No lore of Greece or Rome,
No science peddling with the names of things,

Or reading stars to find inglorious fates,
 Can lift our life with wings
 Far from Death's idle gulf that for the many waits,
 And lengthen out our dates
 With that clear fame whose memory sings
 In manly hearts to come, and nerves them and dilates :
 Nor such thy teaching, Mother of us all !
 Not such the trumpet-call
 Of thy diviner mood,
 That could thy sons entice
 From happy homes and toils, the fruitful nest
 Of those half-virtues which the world calls best,
 Into War's tumult rude ;
 But rather far that stern device
 The sponsors chose that round thy cradle stood
 In the dim, unventured wood,
 The VERITAS that lurks beneath
 The letter's unprolific sheath,
 Life of whate'er makes life worth living,
 Seed-grain of high emprise, immortal food,
 One heavenly thing whereof earth hath the giving.

III.

Many loved Truth, and lavished life's best oil
 Amid the dust of books to find her,
 Content at last, for guerdon of their toil,
 With the cast mantle she hath left behind her.
 Many in sad faith sought for her,
 Many with crossed hands sighed for her ;
 But these, our brothers, fought for her
 At life's dear peril wrought for her,
 So loved her that they died for her,
 Tasting the raptured fleetness
 Of her divine completeness :
 Their higher instincts knew
 Those love her best who to themselves are true,
 And what they dare to dream of, dare to do ;
 They followed her and found her
 Where all may hope to find,
 Not in the ashes of the burnt-out mind,

But beautiful, with danger's sweetness round her.
 Where faith made whole with deed
 Breathes its awakening breath
 Into the lifeless creed,
 They saw her plumed and mailed,
 With sweet, stern face unveiled,
 And all-repaying eyes, look proud on them in death.

IV.

Our slender life runs rippling by, and glides
 Into the silent hollow of the past ;
 What is there that abides
 To make the next age better for the last ?
 Is earth too poor to give us
 Something to live for here that shall outlive us ?
 Some more substantial boon
 Than such as flows and ebbs with Fortune's fickle moon ?
 The little that we see
 From doubt is never free ;
 The little that we do
 Is but half-nobly true ;
 With our laborious hiving
 What men call treasure, and the gods call dross,
 Life seems a jest of Fate's contriving,
 Only secure in every one's conniving,
 A long account of nothings paid with loss,
 Where we poor puppets, jerked by unseen wires,
 After our little hour of strut and rave,
 With all our pasteboard passions and desires,
 Loves, hates, ambitions, and immortal fires,
 Are tossed pell-mell together in the grave.
 But stay ! no age was e'er degenerate,
 Unless men held it at too cheap a rate,
 For in our likeness still we shape our fate.
 Ah, there is something here
 Unfathomed by the cynic's sneer,
 Something that gives our feeble light
 A high immunity from Night,
 Something that leaps life's narrow bars
 To claim its birthright with the hosts of heaven ;

A seed of sunshine that doth leaven
 Our earthly dulness with the beams of stars,
 And glorify our clay
 With light from fountains elder than the Day ;
 A conscience more divine than we,
 A gladness fed with secret tears,
 A vexing, forward-reaching sense
 Of some more noble permanence ;
 A light across the sea,
 Which haunts the soul and will not let it be,
 Still glimmering from the heights of undegenerate years.

v.

 Whither leads the path
 To ampler fates that leads ?
 Not down through flowery meads,
 To reap an aftermarth
 Of youth's vainglorious weeds,
 But up the steep, amid the wrath
 And shock of deadly-hostile creeds,
 Where the world's best hope and stay
 By battle's flashes gropes a desperate way,
 And every turf the fierce foot clings to bleeds.
 Peace hath her not ignoble wreath,
 Ere yet the sharp, decisive word
 Light the black lips of cannon, and the sword
 Dreams in its easeful sheath ;
 But some day the live coal behind the thought,
 Whether from Bäl's stone obscene,
 Or from the shrine serene
 Of God's pure altar brought,
 Bursts up in flame ; the war of tongue and pen
 Learns with what deadly purpose it was fraught,
 And, helpless in the fiery passion caught,
 Shakes all the pillared state with shock of men :
 Some day the soft Ideal that we wooed
 Confronts us fiercely, foe-beset, pursued,
 And cries reproachful : " Was it, then, my praise,
 And not myself was loved ? Prove now thy truth ;
 I claim of thee the promise of thy youth ;

Give me thy life, or cower in empty phrase,
The victim of thy genius, not its mate ! ”

Life may be given in many ways,
And loyalty to Truth be sealed
As bravely in the closet as the field,
So bountiful is Fate ;
But then to stand beside her,
When craven churls deride her,
To front a lie in arms and not to yield,
This shows, methinks, God's plan
And measure of a stalwart man,
Limbed like the old heroic breeds,
Who stands self-poised on manhood's solid earth,
Not forced to frame excuses for his birth,
Fed from within with all the strength he needs.

VI.

Such was he, our Martyr-Chief,
Whom late the Nation he had led,
With ashes on her head,
Wept with the passion of an angry grief :
Forgive me, if from present things I turn
To speak what in my heart will beat and burn,
And hang my wreath on his world-honored urn.
Nature, they say, doth dote,
And cannot make a man
Save on some worn-out plan,
Repeating us by rote :
For him her Old-World moulds aside she threw,
And, choosing sweet clay from the breast
Of the unexhausted West,
With stuff untainted shaped a hero new,
Wise, steadfast in the strength of God, and true.
How beautiful to see
Once more a shepherd of mankind indeed,
Who loved his charge, but never loved to lead ;
One whose meek flock the people joyed to be,
Not lured by any cheat of birth,
But by his clear-grained human worth,
And brave old wisdom of sincerity !

They knew that outward grace is dust ;
 They could not choose but trust
 In that sure-footed mind's unfaltering skill,
 And supple-tempered will
 That bent like perfect steel to spring again and thrust.
 His was no lonely mountain-peak of mind,
 Thrusting to thin air o'er our cloudy bars,
 A sea-mark now, now lost in vapors blind ;
 Broad prairie rather, genial, level-lined,
 Fruitful and friendly for all human kind,
 Yet also nigh to heaven and loved of loftiest stars.
 Nothing of Europe here,
 Or, then, of Europe fronting mornward still,
 Ere any names of Serf and Peer
 Could Nature's equal scheme deface
 And thwart her genial will ;
 Here was a type of the true elder race,
 And one of Plutarch's men talked with us face to face.
 I praise him not ; it were too late ;
 And some innative weakness there must be
 In him who condescends to victory
 Such as the Present gives, and cannot wait,
 Safe in himself as in a fate.
 So always firmly he :
 He knew to bide his time,
 And can his fame abide,
 Still patient in his simple faith sublime,
 Till the wise years decide.
 Great captains, with their guns and drums,
 Disturb our judgment for the hour,
 But at last silence comes ;
 These all are gone, and, standing like a tower,
 Our children shall behold his fame,
 The kindly-earnest, brave, foreseeing man,
 Sagacious, patient, dreading praise, not blame,
 New birth of our new soil, the first American.

VII.

Long as man's hope insatiate can discern
 Or only guess some more inspiring goal
 Outside of Self, enduring as the pole,

Along whose course the flying axles burn
 Of spirits bravely-pitched, earth's manlier brood;
 Long as below we cannot find
 The meed that stills the inexorable mind;
 So long this faith to some ideal Good,
 Under whatever mortal names it masks,
 Freedom, Law, Country, this ethereal mood
 That thanks the Fates for their severer tasks,
 Feeling its challenged pulses leap,
 While others skulk in subterfuges cheap,
 And, set in Danger's van, has all the boon it asks,
 Shall win man's praise and woman's love,
 Shall be a wisdom that we set above
 All other skills and gifts to culture dear,
 A virtue round whose forehead we inwreath
 Laurels that with a living passion breathe
 When other crowns grow, while we twine them, sear.
 What brings us thronging these high rites to pay,
 And seal these hours the noblest of our year,
 Save that our brothers found this better way?

VIII.

We sit here in the Promised Land
 That flows with Freedom's honey and milk;
 But 'twas they won it, sword in hand,
 Making the nettle danger soft for us as silk.
 We welcome back our bravest and our best; —
 Ah me! not all! some come not with the rest,
 Who went forth brave and bright as any here!
 I strive to mix some gladness with my strain,
 But the sad strings complain,
 And will not please the ear:
 I sweep them for a pæan, but they wane
 Again and yet again
 Into a dirge, and die away, in pain.
 In these brave ranks I only see the gaps,
 Thinking of dear ones whom the dumb turf wraps,
 Dark to the triumph which they died to gain:
 Fitlier may others greet the living,
 For me the past is unforgiving;

I with uncovered head
 Salute the sacred dead,
 Who went, and who return not. — Say not so !
 'Tis not the grapes of Canaan that repay,
 But the high faith that failed not by the way ;
 Virtue treads paths that end not in the grave ;
 No bar of endless night exiles the brave ;

And to the saner mind
 We rather seem the dead that stayed behind.
 Blow, trumpets, all your exultations blow !
 For never shall their aureoled presence lack :
 I see them muster in a gleaming row,
 With ever-youthful brows that nobler show ;
 We find in our dull road their shining track ;

In every nobler mood
 We feel the orient of their spirit glow,
 Part of our life's unalterable good,
 Of all our saintlier aspiration ;

They come transfigured back,
 Secure from change in their high-hearted ways,
 Beautiful evermore, and with the rays
 Of morn on their white Shields of Expectation !

IX.

But is there hope to save
 Even this ethereal essence from the grave ?
 What ever 'scaped Oblivion's subtle wrong
 Save a few clarion names, or golden threads of song ?

Before my musing eye
 The mighty ones of old sweep by,
 Disvoic'd now and insubstantial things,
 As noisy once as we ; poor ghosts of kings,
 Shadows of empire wholly gone to dust,
 And many races, nameless long ago,
 To darkness driven by that imperious gust
 Of ever-rushing Time that here doth blow :
 O visionary world, condition strange,
 Where naught abiding is but only Change,
 Where the deep-bolted stars themselves still shift and range !
 Shall we to more continuance make pretence ?

Renown builds tombs ; a life-estate is Wit ;

And, bit by bit,

The cunning years steal all from us but woe ;

Leaves are we, whose decays no harvest sow.

But, when we vanish hence,

Shall they lie forceless in the dark below,

Save to make green their little length of sods,

Or deepen pansies for a year or two,

Who now to us are shining-sweet as gods ?

Was dying all they had the skill to do ?

That were not fruitless : but the Soul resents

Such short-lived service, as if blind events

Ruled without her, or earth could so endure ;

She claims a more divine investiture

Of longer tenure than Fame's airy rents ;

Whate'er she touches doth her nature share ;

Her inspiration haunts the ennobled air,

Gives eyes to mountains blind,

Ears to the deaf earth, voices to the wind,

And her clear trump sings succor everywhere

By lonely bivouacs to the wakeful mind ;

For soul inherits all that soul could dare :

Yea, Manhood hath a wider span

And larger privilege of life than man.

The single deed, the private sacrifice,

So radiant now through proudly-hidden tears,

Is covered up erelong from mortal eyes

With thoughtless drift of the deciduous years ;

But that high privilege that makes all men peers,

That leap of heart whereby a people rise

Up to a noble anger's height,

And, flamed on by the Fates, not shrink, but grow more bright,

That swift validity in noble veins,

Of choosing danger and disdaining shame,

Of being set on flame

By the pure fire that flies all contact base,

But wraps its chosen with angelic might,

These are imperishable gains,

Sure as the sun, medicinal as light,

These hold great futures in their lusty reins

And certify to earth a new imperial race.

X.

Who now shall sneer?
 Who dare again to say we trace
 Our lines to a plebeian race?
 Roundhead and Cavalier!
 Dumb are those names erewhile in battle loud;
 Dream-footed as the shadow of a cloud,
 They flit across the ear:
 That is best blood that hath most iron in't.
 To edge resolve with, pouring without stint
 For what makes manhood dear.
 Tell us not of Plantagenets,
 Hapsburgs, and Guelfs, whose thin bloods crawl
 Down from some victor in a border-brawl!
 How poor their outworn coronets,
 Matched with one leaf of that plain civic wreath
 Our brave for honor's blazon shall bequeath,
 Through whose desert a rescued Nation sets
 Her heel on treason, and the trumpet hears
 Shout victory, tingling Europe's sullen ears
 With vain resentments and more vain regrets!

XI.

Not in anger, not in pride,
 Pure from passion's mixture rude
 Ever to base earth allied,
 But with far-heard gratitude,
 Still with heart and voice renewed,
 To heroes living and dear martyrs dead,
 The strain should close that consecrates our brave.
 Lift the heart and lift the head!
 Lofty be its mood and grave,
 Not without a martial ring,
 Not without a prouder tread
 And a peal of exultation:
 Little right has he to sing
 Through whose heart in such an hour
 Beats no march of conscious power,
 Sweeps no tumult of elation!

'Tis no Man we celebrate,
 By his country's victories great,
 A hero half, and half the whim of Fate,
 But the pith and marrow of a Nation
 Drawing force from all her men,
 Highest, humblest, weakest, all,
 For her time of need, and then
 Pulsing it again through them,
 Till the basest can no longer cower,
 Feeling his soul spring up divinely tall,
 Touched but in passing by her mantle-hem.
 Come back, then, noble pride, for 'tis her dower!
 How could poet ever tower,
 If his passions, hopes, and fears,
 If his triumphs and his tears,
 Kept not measure with his people?
 Boom, cannon, boom to all the winds and waves!
 Clash out, glad bells, from every rocking steeple!
 Banners, adance with triumph, bend your staves!
 And from every mountain-peak
 Let beacon-fire to answering beacon speak,
 Katahdin tell Monadnock, White-face he,
 And so leap on in light from sea to sea,
 Till the glad news be sent
 Across a kindling continent,
 Making earth feel more firm and air breathe braver:
 "Be proud! for she is saved, and all have helped to save her!
 She that lifts up the manhood of the poor,
 She of the open soul and open door,
 With room about her hearth for all mankind;
 The fire is dreadful in her eyes no more;
 From her bold front the helm she doth unbind,
 Sends all her handmaid armies back to spin,
 And bids her navies, that so lately hurled
 Their crashing battle, hold their thunders in,
 Swimming like birds of calm along the unharmed shore.
 No challenge sends she to the elder world,
 That looked askance and hated; a light scorn
 Plays o'er her mouth, as round her mighty knees
 She calls her children back, and waits the morn
 Of nobler day, enthroned between her subject seas."

XII.

Bow down, dear Land, for thou hast found release !
Thy God, in these distempered days,
Hath taught thee the sure wisdom of His ways,
And through thine enemies hath wrought thy peace !
Bow down in prayer and praise !
No poorest in thy borders but may now
Lift to the juster skies a man's enfranchised brow,
O Beautiful ! my Country ! ours once more !
Smoothing thy gold of war-dishevelled hair
O'er such sweet brows as never other wore,
And letting thy set lips,
Freed from wrath's pale eclipse,
The rosy edges of their smile lay bare,
What words divine of lover or of poet
Could tell our love and make thee know it,
Among the Nations bright beyond compare ?
What were our lives without thee ?
What all our lives to save thee ?
We reck not what we gave thee ;
We will not dare to doubt thee,
But ask whatever else, and we will dare !